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SUBJECT: ELECTION CHIEF OPTIMISTIC ABOUT '08 ELECTIONS

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: During a January 23 call by Ambassador Mozena, National Electoral Commission (CNE) President Antonio Caetano de Sousa declared he was "optimistic" and "quite sure" the CNE would successfully carry out legislative elections in September 2008 in the time frame laid out by President Dos Santos. He hoped the election could be only a single day vice the two announced by the President. Caetano acknowledged the importance of transparency in both planning and executing the electoral process and confirmed that international observers would be invited. He spoke freely about the challenges faced by the CNE as it plans for upcoming elections. Caetano spoke positively about U.S.-funded IFES support for the CNE. END SUMMARY

Avoiding Kenya: Political Parties to Play Nice?

¶2. (U) Caetano called ensuring fair and transparent elections a "problematic" issue for the CNE, as so much of how elections are viewed depends on the behavior of political parties. How they conduct their campaigns and control the expectations of their supporters will heavily influence the legitimacy with which the electorate views the results, he offered. In his view only two political parties truly matter in Angolan politics: the MPLA and UNITA. Only these parties have the resources and supporters not only to campaign heavily nationwide, but to work with the CNE to observe elections and conduct civic education. Despite the rocky history these parties have had in the past election, Caetano predicted both will "play nice" during legislative elections as they position themselves for the '09 presidential run.

In Search of Transparency

¶3. (U) Caetano acknowledged the importance of working with political parties along the path toward elections, to explain consistently the CNE's decisions and create transparent processes. He stated the CNE's intention to include political parties and civil society in the planning process and confirmed that the CNE's electoral calendar would soon be made public so that stakeholders could plan their activities. The calendar, a timeline of key events, is currently being finalized; Caetano estimated it would be approved and published within a week.

¶4. (U) Caetano spoke at length about the important role trained electoral observers play in a just and transparent electoral process. The CNE plans to train political party and civil society election monitors in the electoral process and electoral laws. Caetano affirmed that international observers would also be invited; he stated that invitations would be coming "soon," but would not specify when or speculate on whom the GRA would invite. He did confirm, however, that the CNE would credential designated Embassy staff as observers, and stated that international observers

can be invited by either the GRA or any political party.
One logistical hurdle after another...

15. (U) The electoral calendar is but one step on a long series of logistical hurdles the CNE must cross to conduct transparent elections. He estimated the need for more than 10,000 polling stations nationwide; by law each services no more than 1,000 voters. The CNE has yet to determine how it will select the 5-7 people that will be hired and trained to run each station, nor determined the means of communication and transmittal of results between individual stations and municipal authorities. Caetano did confirm, however, that voting will be done by paper ballot and votes will be counted publicly in an effort to increase transparency.

16. (SBU) Caetano stressed the CNE's efforts in covering rural provinces that were a source of UNITA's discontent in 1992, such as Moxico and Kuando Kubango. These large provinces lack infrastructure and are heavily mined in places. He said teams are using helicopters to explore logistical options in Kuando Kubango. (Note: Curiously, he made no reference to seeking information from the Inter-ministerial Commission for the Electoral Process (CIPE), which presumably would have an up-to-date picture of coping with the region's limited infrastructure following its recently completed voter registration drive. End note.)

17. (SBU) Caetano spoke positively about the support provided by the USG-funded IFES program. He said the IFES team had just seen him earlier in the day as they further develop their action plan to assist the CNE with electoral logistics. Caetano said he was pleased with the meeting and that he looked forward to receiving their plan.

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One Day vs. Two Day Elections -----

18. (SBU) The only point that rattled Caetano was a question on the President's controversial statement that elections would occur over a two day period. Most opposition political parties have decried this move, stating that it not only violates the electoral law (which many interpret as calling for a one day election) but could also facilitate fraud and overnight ballot-box stuffing by the ruling MPLA. A visibly uncomfortable Caetano confirmed the law "does speak of one day," but stated the CNE had not yet taken a public position on the issue, because it is still studying election logistics in rural areas. He repeatedly stated the CNE intention to do everything possible to conduct elections in one day, but, he added, "at this point it's too early to determine if that is a feasible proposition." He said he was surprised by the President's statement, and wryly stated that perhaps Dos Santos knows something the CNE doesn't about infrastructure conditions.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Caetano seemed confident that the CNE is on track for September '08 elections and took pains to detail the CNE's efforts to create an inclusive electoral process. Clearly, however, the CNE's most difficult work remains. The IFES program will certainly help the CNE get a handle on daunting logistical challenges.
MOZENA